

Between Reality and the Ideal

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

What I like about Christianity is that it is ideal and realistic at the same time. It is ideal to the extent that it makes a person, if he wants, a heavenly being, an angel on earth; and realistic in its care for him, if he seeks the ideal, so that he can achieve it. It rejects sin and fights it on principle, and pledges to the person, who is weak before it, a healing method that will rid him of it. It nurtures him until he is strengthened in spirit, supports him so that he does not fall, and if he does, Christianity strengthens him so that he can rise from his fall and start again.

The ideal of Christianity is derived from the word “example,” meaning it offers the presence of a teacher, a role model, a clear standard which the believer strives, with God's grace, to imitate. The ideal is not a utopia, a dream, that is impossible to reach or unworkable. The person of Christ Himself is the ideal, role model, and example. It believes that the Word of God was incarnated and became a human being to give humans the ability to reach His likeness. He became a perfect human being in every aspect, a real human being like us in every aspect, except for sin.

The Church Fathers have said about His earthly birth: “God (the Word) became man, so that man might become God.” The true Christian seeks to imitate his Master in everything. The Holy Fathers teach us to think, before embarking on any action: If Christ were in my place, how would He act? Thus, the believer imitates, as much as possible, His example. Many followed this path and were sanctified and exalted, becoming angels in human bodies. Some are well-known, even saints whose fragrance spread throughout the world. Many of them – perhaps most – are unknown or known within a small area. Therefore, after Pentecost, the Church celebrates a special Sunday feast for All Saints, “whether men or women, known or unknown” (*The Horologion*, or *The Book of the Hours*).

Christianity's realism lies in the rich, militant, spiritual approach accumulated by the work of the Holy Spirit in it over the centuries. This approach is based on the believer's progression through the stages of the Gospel, based primarily on sound, personalized guidance. The most important books in this field are available to everyone. But to live what is stated in them, and for the believer to gain the ability to apply it, requires someone to personally lead and guide. Father Andrei Skrima

wrote in an introduction about the book “The Ladder of Divine Ascent” (a didactic, ascetical, and spiritual book, considered essential in the Orthodox Church): “This book is not for reading.” By this, he meant this to live by it, not just to learn from it. This book is lived with help from an experienced guide. It is not enough to read about a spiritual teacher until you truly walk the path of his teaching.

The personal dimension of guidance is essential in Christianity. The general recipe for all believers is the Gospel. Living and applying it depends on each person’s ability, circumstances, personality, character, and upbringing. Not all human beings are the same internally. Someone who grew up in a pious and devout home environment is different from someone who grew up in something completely different. Whoever has a sin ingrained in him since childhood will not be treated in the same way as someone who has never experienced this sin.

Then there is the growth in our life in Christ. Not everyone is at the same spiritual level. People are advanced, beginning, and somewhere in between. “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Corinthians 13:11).

Bustan al-Ruhbaan (The Garden of Monks) tells the following story: The order of the monks in the Egyptian desert at that time required sleeping on a mat without a pillow. A new monastic student came to them from a wealthy background. The abbot allowed him to use a stone as a pillow. One of the brothers complained, so the abbot asked him: “How were you sleeping at home, my son?” He answered: “On the floor with my brothers in the same room. The abbot said to him: “So, you did not make a major concession in the monastery. As for that brother, about whom you complained, he was in his house, sleeping on a bed, with a soft mattress underneath it, and an ostrich feather pillow. Do you think he could bear our austerity all at once?”

There is reality and there is the ideal, and what is in between is the path on which the Christian strives throughout his life. The fruit of virtue is not a goal in itself. Loving God is the goal, and the fruit is a natural product of it. Your ultimate goal is to keep striving toward perfection, whether you reach it or not. The great spiritual teacher, St. John Climacus, said: “God will not hold you accountable for the number of virtues you have attained, but for the sincere effort you have made to achieve

this or that virtue.” In another place, he says something shocking at first glance: “The drops of sweat of your struggle are more valuable in the eyes of God than the water of baptism.”

Perhaps the pastoral realism of Christianity is most evident in the absence of a clear and conclusive legal definition that determines for the believer what to do in both general and specific situations. There is no teaching, gentle or rigid, that soothes the conscience. You are constantly inspired by the Spirit of God, the Spirit of true understanding, to illuminate your path, so you know how to walk and act in the face of countless situations that may come your way.

Take marital relationships, for example. There is no specific teaching regarding how spouses should deal with each other in all aspects. The concept of married life is clear in Christianity. But how it is lived, the extent of each partner’s tolerance, the method of encompassing love that accommodates the other’s flaws, and many other questions become the subject of research and dialogue. These require frank openness between the spouses, under the care of their spiritual father, who helps them practically to succeed and overcome their failures through continuous personal spiritual care. Care that acknowledges existing weakness transcends and strengthens the person. It does not exempt from the obligations of repentance for what the Church considers a human weakness, which it treats until the person is cured. There are many behavioral issues, or issues within the science of ethics, that are not subjects of definitive decision in Christianity as much as they are subjects of dialogue, prayer, and inspiration from above.

Christians do not have any justification that can completely clear their consciences. You are called to confront the spiritual forces of evil in all their forms in this fallen world by arming yourself with the gospel, seeking divine guidance and advice from spiritual fathers, and strengthening yourself with your brothers and sisters in the Lord. If you make a mistake, nurture a life of repentance in yourself, making amends for what you did, renew your life, and direct it towards deeper and deeper spiritual maturity and awareness.

Saint Ephraim the Syrian defines the Church as “the community of penitents,” that is, those who walk in this community. As a Christian, you cannot neglect repentance for a single day. You walk in it, rising in its spirit, day by day, toward the full stature

of Christ. Christianity is not a static religion in the sense of being satisfied with so-called religious duties. It is a path on which you are always moving toward the peak. It is a dynamic faith, if you prefer, because it does not stop you at a certain level of transcendence, maturity, and holiness, but rather opens the horizons wider before you to the Absolute, to God, so that you imitate Him and live up to His example. If you truly love your Lord, you will throw yourself into His arms, not looking for peace of mind, but rather, desiring to live in His care. You walk, without stopping, with Him and to Him, being satisfied with Him alone, and finding yourself in Him.